DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 150 603 CS 203 923

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TITLE Teaching Black Theatre and Adolescence: The Stifling Mother in Three Plays.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (67th, New York City, November 24-26, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; American Literature; *Authoritarianism; *Black Literature; *Black Mothers; *Drama; Dramatics; English Instruction; Higher Education; Interpersonal Problems; Literary Analysis; Literature Appreciation; *Parent Attitudes; Parent Child Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Black Theater

ABSTRACT

To engage students' interest and help them appreciate black drama, teachers may have their classes discuss and dramatize three plays that deal with adolescence and the stifling mother: James Baldwin's "The Amen Corner," Louis Peterson's "Take a Giant Step," and J.E. Franklin's "Black Girl." This paper shows how the adolescents in these plays experience great pain while growing up in an authoritarian, matriarchal household and examines the ways in which the mothers in these plays attempt to impose their wills on their children. The children in these plays seek refuge in sex or drink and, in two cases, escape from their mothers' dominance by moving away from home. (GW)

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TEACHING BLACK THEATRE AND ADOLESCENCE: THE STIFLING MOTHER IN THREE PLAYS

Glenda Gill

During my childhood I had a burning desire to go on the stage. On my twelfth birthday, I was baptized in the Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Clarksville, Tennessee. The following day, I was on the porch of "Miss" Lillian, a black principal, showing her some new conga steps. She was overcome with disapproval, "Oh, Glenda, you have just been baptized. The theatre is an evil place where you must take off your clothes. You are not cut out for that. Your mother is a business woman and that's what you should be. Stop this sinful dancing and work on your typewriting, instead." This was my introduction to stifling attempts from authority figures.

By the time that I was thirty-two, my interest in the theatre had intensified since that day on "Miss" Lillian's porch; I continued to encounter opposition, but was learning how to deal with it. Once, when I was beginning to succeed with attracting interest in the theatre, I asked all the black ministers in El Paso to advertise a University of Texas at El Paso lyceum presentation of Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee. Then I later learned that a minister had stopped his clerk from reading my letter, saying, "Just a minute, sister--any more of those theatre announcements, please check with me." Rather stupefied that the "Miss" Lillian thinking was clearly very much alive, I called the minister's wife and assured her that this was not a "hipshaking, finger-popping" show, but a cultural excursion. Accepting my offer of two free tickets, she and her husband found Davis and Dee a positive experience.

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Determined to find ways to alter people's views, I soon found that the best way was to involve the students and the community in dramatic presentations. While I made black theatre palatable to some elements of the community, opposition did not cease. One young, attractive white female, after assuring me that she would pray for me in my teaching of "inflammatory material," gave me a copy of the book, Satan Is Alive and Well and Living on Planet Earth, in hopes that I would re-examine my actions. One extreme example came when an anonymous letter, mailed from Carlsbad, New Mexico, and containing some pictures of Africans, said, "You would have us think that these baboons have minds and can create drama and poetry and will probably get a government grant to do so."

How can one teach black theatre and what themes should one explore in the midst of such controversy and attitudes? I would like to look at one theme: adolescence and the stifling mother in three plays: James Baldwin's The Amen Corner, Louis Peterson's Take A Giant Step and J. E. Franklin's Black Girl. These dramas would work well in a classroom because they deal with matters that concern many adolescents and many adults. Discussing and dramatizing them with music could create insight and enlarge the students' sympathies and understanding. The Amen Corner would even be ineffective without the music.

Adolescents suffer a great deal if a mother tries to impose her will on the children.[1] Of the several mothers in black drama who have imposed their wills on their children, I have chosen to

[1] As early as 1926, Sidney Howard portrayed Mrs. Phelps in The Silver Cord as a cannibal who devours her young. In American drama, she is the archetype of the mother who refuses to permit her sons to mature beyond adolescence.

select only three because they, more vividly than the others, show how their adolescents experienced the excruciating pain of growing up in an authoritarian, matriarchal household.

One effect of the stifling mother is that the son or daughter seeks refuge in sex. Spencer Scott, the young man in Take A Giant Step seeks comfort in the arms of older women; May Scott, his mother, interferes, as many mothers do, regardless of race. During the time of Spencer's recovery from his grandmother's death, May hires a woman, Christine, to look after him. Soon, she suspects that they might go to bed together; Not wanting her seventeen-year old son to be seduced by an older woman, May says, explaining her dismissal of Christine, "All that pampering and coddling she did with you makes me sick to my stomach." (Black Theatre, USA, 579)
The mother has heard stories about maids being left alone in houses with young men before, and announces, "I'm not saying it's gone that far, yet. But an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." (Black Theatre, USA, 579)

Previously, Spence had tried to pick up a woman in a bar--a woman who was bored and frustrated, who wanted to enjoy gaiety, who resented the fact that a man stared at her as though she was cheap, but who finally lets herself be picked up by a man other than Spence in the hope of finding excitement. Following Spence's failure in picking up this woman, he did get one of the "three flowers" named Violet to a room. Offering her $2.39, he, like Holden Caulfield, decided upon getting to the woman's room, not to have sex. Among other evasion tactics, he offers to read to her. Spence is left to his fears that he may die before he gets to know a woman sexually.

David, in The Amen Corner, also seeks solace in sex as he copes with Margaret, perhaps the most stifling of the three mothers I am discussing:

> Margaret. Where you been until this time in the morning, son?
> David. I was out visiting some people I know. And it got to be later than I realized and I stayed there overnight.
> Margaret. How come it got to be so late before you realized it?
> David. I don't know. We just got to talking.
> Margaret. Talking? (She moves closer to him.) What was you talking about, son? You stink of whiskey! (She slaps him.)
> David. (sits at table) That ain't going to do no good, ma. (She slaps him again. David slumps on the table, his head in his arms.)
> Margaret. Is that what I been slaving for all these long, hard years? Is I carried slops and scrubbed floors and ate left-overs and swallowed bitterness by the gallon jugful--for this? So you could walk in here this Lord's day morning stinking from whiskey and some no-count, dirty black girl's sweat? Declare, I wish you'd died in my belly, too, if I been slaving all these years for this! (Patterson's Black Theatre, 578-579.)

David wants to run away, but the father, Luke, shows him that one must run to something, not from. He stresses to his son and Margaret that humans must love, one of Baldwin's major themes. So David leaves home because the atmosphere is so stifling, and the problem is not resolved.

Netta and Billie Jean in Black Girl experience a different kind of problem in sexual maturation. Neither is seen directly in connection with a sexual encounter, but Mama Rosie allows the sisters who have not aspired to a college education to mock, belittle and humiliate the two sisters who do. Ruth Ann, one of the sisters with low aspirations, says to the other sister, Norma, about Netta (whom Mama Rosie has reared), "While you over there, Norm, raise her dress up and see if she got one-a them things. I always wanted to see what one-a these freaks look like."(Black Girl,

Netta has to be odd, in their opinion, simply because she did not remain in the ghetto and have babies. Mama Rosie also indicts Billie Jean without proof simply because she has dreams of being a ballet dancer and can only get an audience at The Groovey Grill in Houston. Mama declares, speaking of the daughters without ambition,

> Mama Rosie. Yeah, they got caught, and the way Billie Jean like to shake her tail, she's next. I don't put no faith in none of 'em no more. My girl Netta is gonna pull me through. When she get her diploma, she gonna come back here and teach. (Black Girl, 20)

Spence, David and Billie Jean experience frustration, humiliation, doubt and fear about love and sex in homes where mothers have failed to give guidance and encouragement, but instead have shamed, nagged, and forced their children to their authoritarian mold. While parents may argue that the father must also share responsibility, Baldwin, Franklin and Peterson focus on the mother.

During one of my evening classes at Fort Bliss, Texas, a black mother visited my Appreciation and Analysis of the Drama course. "I teach my children that they are individuals. There is too much emphasis on blackness," she said. May Scott seemed to hold the same views in Take a Giant Step. Her "stifling" takes the form of insisting that Spence take on white values. She fails to understand his search for companionship in this alien territory; he is removed from lower-class blacks in this white neighborhood, but also from companionship. May knows that Spence has been friends with whites and believes that he can be again. Denying her son his black heritage in order to show him that he is living in a world in which a black man

can be lynched for speaking to a white woman as he has spoken to his teacher, this middle-class mother is also denying Spence his self-esteem. On returning home, he explains that his teacher called the black slaves "morons." At home, May insists that he return to school and apologize for speaking up. Spence adamantly refuses. He pleads with her to understand, affirming that he has done nothing wrong. Granny points out that May, in moving to a white neighborhood, has thought only of potential benefits.

> We've bent every effort to see that you were raised in a decent neighborhood and wouldn't have to live in slums because we always wanted the best for you. But now I'm not so sure we haven't made a terrible mistake--because you seem not to realize what you are--You're a little colored boy--that's what you are--and you have no business talking back to white women, no matter what they say or what they do. If you were in the South, you could be lynched for that and your father and I couldn't do anything about it. So from now on, my advice to you is to try and remember your place. (Black Theatre, p. 116)

Historically, May is right, but the playwright suggests that she might have found some way that she could fathom Spence's need for pride and self-respect. Nevertheless, she continues:

> You're too proud. You think you can go through life being proud, don't you? Well, you're wrong. You're a little black boy--and you don't seem to understand it . . .You think this is bad; well, it'll be worse . . .I'm sorry that you didn't die when you were a baby. Do you hear that? I'm sorry you didn't die. (Black Theatre, pp. 136-137)

This speech follows Spence's dismay that his mother has invited his former friends over for a party following the death of Spence's grandmother, and following his period of expulsion. A modern reader would have to observe that Peterson wrote this in 1953, a year before the famous 1954 Supreme Court Decision;

black youth were jailed merely for attempting to enroll in a white school. This was four years before Faubus defied Eisenhower in Little Rock and the national guard had to be employed to let nine black children enter Central High. "Sassing out" a white teacher was most "unthinkable." Perhaps things would be slightly different for Spence, today; but in 1953, he ventilated at great risk. However, he needed an escape. His mother could only see the social forces, not Spence's individual suffering.

Adolescents seek escape from authoritarian influences. It may be in various ways, but escape they do. Another kind of escape dramatized in two of the three plays is drinking. Margaret in The Amen Corner drives David to excessive drinking in order that he may endure her psychological and physical abuse.

> Margaret. David, I ain't so old. I know the world is wicked. I know young people have terrible temptations. Did you do it because you was afraid them boys would make fun of you?
> David. No.
> Margaret. Was it on account of some girl?
> David. No.
> Margaret. Was it--your daddy put you up to it? Was it your daddy made you think it was manly to get drunk?
> David. Daddy--I don't think you can blame it on Daddy, Mama.
> Margaret. Why'd you do it, David? When I done tried so hard to raise you right? Why'd you want to hurt me this way?
> . . .
> David. Mama, I want to be a man. It's time you let me be a man. You got to let me go.
> (a pause)
> . . .
> Margaret. I reckon I thought I was Joshua and could make the sun stand still.
> David. Mama, I'm leaving this house tonight. I'm going on the road, with some other guys. (Patterson's Black Theatre, pp. 579-581.)

David leaves Margaret's household to become a musician, not to play in Margaret's church, but to play music where he can "say something in music that's never been said before." (Black Theatre, p. 581) He escapes the "stifling" domain.

In Black Girl, Billie Jean also leaves home, in hopes of becoming a ballet dancer. She emerges from a psychological hell where she cannot so much as listen to a record in her room in Houston's ghetto without being disturbed and deliberately harassed. Fleeing a home where the mother allows the father, bedecked in purple ruffs and red bow tie, to come home and give the other daughters money while he labels her "some other nigguh's kid," Billie Jean feels justified. Permitting the other sisters to break Billie Jean's records, the mother also allows them to deride her dreams and to taunt her womanhood because she, too, has not had a baby out of wedlock. The young adolescent must rise from this maelstrom of human degradation. A creature of pathos, Billie Jean longs for love and understanding from her mother. But Mama Rosie explains why she has been so critical and unsupportive of this seventeen-year old black female. I think this passage illustrates the universality of this kind of mother role. Mama Rosie, like all black mothers, is not a stock figure, but a complex and complicated human. I conclude with Mama Rosie's final speech which shows that she is to be pitied instead of ridiculed.

> BILLIE JEAN. (Searching for words) Mama, I'm fixing to go now. (Mama Rosie does not answer.) When I get there, I'll write you and let you know I got there all right. (Rosie still does not answer.) I think it takes

about eight hours. . .or something like that. (Billie Jean searches for more words. The Horn sounds again.) Thanksgiving is the next big holiday, mama, and . . . if I have the money, I'll come home. (Mu'Dear enters from her bedroom.)
Mu'DEAR. That's your cab, honey. You take care-a yourself, now, you hear? (They embrace.)
. . .
MAMA ROSIE. Billie Jean.
BILLIE JEAN. Ma'am?
MAMA ROSIE. I ain't never in my life apologized to nobody for nothing. It just ain't in me. (Long pause.)
BILLIE JEAN. Yes, ma'am.
MAMA ROSIE. Just . . .drop me a card or something ever now and then . . .let me know how your dancing is coming. (Billie Jean goes back and hugs her. She rushes out of the house. She cannot hold in her tears. Mu'Dear stands looking sympathetically at Mama Rosie.) She know I didn't mean to hurt her, DEAH. It just looked like all my children was gon end up like me . . . like me. (Rosie cannot control the trembling of her lips but she makes an iron effort until tears betray her.)
(Black Girl, p.42-43)

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The University of Texas at El Paso
NCTE Annual Convention
New York City
November, 1977

N.B. The texts of the three plays in these papers can be found in the following:

The Amen Corner appears both in Patterson's Black Theater and in the Hatch and Shine Black Theatre, USA.

Take A Giant Step appears in both of the above.

Black Girl is a separate edition published by Dramatists Play Service, Inc.